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AUTHOR Galang, Rosita G.
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ABSTRACT

Problems and issues in the field of native language proficiency assessment for Asian American students are examined. Language skills assessment in both English and the native language is a crucial step in the provision of equal educational opportunity to language minority students. Language assessment for Asian Americans, the fastest growing group of language minority students in the United States, should evaluate language preference, proficiency, and dominance. A severe lack of language assessment instruments dealing with Asian language was revealed by a review of the available language tests for bilingual students. The few tests available have not been systematically evaluated or disseminated. Among the many controversies surrounding language testing is the increasing emphasis on communicative competence as opposed to linguistic skills. Despite the new emphasis on communicative competence, most tests consist of discrete items that evaluate subskills and skill components. Suggested future directions for research and test development include the distinction between discrete point and integrative tests, a theoretical framework for communicative competence, and a more systematic evaluation of existing tests. The cultural and linguistic diversity of Asian American students complicates the task of meeting their educational needs. A glossary and references are appended. (RW)

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NATIVE LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT OF ASIAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

Rosita G. Galang

Introduction

The role of testing in the educational process cannot be overemphasized. Tests may serve predictive, diagnostic, or evaluative functions in teaching and learning. They can be utilized to determine the student's potential for learning, to reveal the weaknesses of teaching or the gaps of learning, or assess the degree of student's success in a formal learning experience.

Language tests may be categorized according to their functions (Broughton et al., 1978; Harris, 1969; Robinett, 1978). A language aptitude or prognostic test measures an individual's potential for language learning, i.e., the individual's ability to acquire specific language skills or objectives. A language proficiency test, which usually assess a wide range of skills as well as subject matter, indicates what an individual is capable of doing in the language being tested. This might be used to determine the individual's readiness for an instructional program, to place the individual in an appropriate language class (also called a placement test), or even to diagnose the individual's specific strengths and weaknesses (also called a diagnostic test). An achievement test measures the extent to which a student has learned the specific skills or body of information taught. It can be used to determine the degree of student achievement of the instructional goals or the success of instruction. Proficiency tests and achievement tests are by far the most frequently used.

Although the different types of assessment are important in the educational process, the discussion in this paper will be limited to the native language proficiency assessment of Asian-American students. Specifically, the paper will examine the following:

1. Need for the language assessment of language minority students in the United States;
2. Native language assessment of Asian-American students: instruments, problems, and needs;

3. Recent developments and controversies in language testing; and

4. Future directions for research and development.

From a linguistic perspective, problems and issues will be highlighted and some recommendations for future effort in this field of study will be offered.

Assessing the Language Skills of Language Students in the United States: A Must

As evidenced by recent immigration trends and census figures, the number of students who speak languages or who come from environments where the dominant languages are other than English is rapidly increasing in the United States. The growing interest in the schooling of language minority students is demonstrated by the increasing numbers of articles and books on the subject. Bilingual and other language programs have been and are being established to meet the educational needs of these children.

Several problems are faced by those who make decisions about appropriate educational programs for language minority students. Pedagogical and other issues have been debated by those concerned with the education of these students.

A crucial step in designing and implementing programs that provide equal and quality educational opportunities to language minority students is the assessment of their linguistic skills and needs. An evaluation of a student's proficiency in English is needed in order to determine if the student is linguistically prepared to function in a classroom in which English is the predominant or only language of instruction, and to compete on an equal basis with classmates who are native speakers of English. It is also necessary to measure the student's proficiency in his/her native language in order to determine which will be the more effective language of instruction at least initially, so as to facilitate

learning and to prevent academic retardation. Assessment in both English and the native language will also yield information that will help teachers and administrators determine the extent and context in which bilingual children can operate in each of the two languages concerned.

Whether mandated or not, the assessment of the language minority student's proficiency in both English and the native language is a must for planning and implementing of bilingual and/or other appropriate instructional programs that will best serve their educational needs.

Native Language Assessment of Asian-American Students: Instruments, Problems, and Needs

Asian-Americans comprise the fastest growing group among the language minority students in America. Their number has increased from 1.5 million in 1970 to 3.5 million in 1980 (ref. ?). This second largest group among the limited English proficient (LEP) population must be properly identified and their needs adequately assessed so that educational opportunities for them can be maximized.

Language assessment is a complex process; it becomes even more complex with Asian-American students, many of whom speak more than one language or use dialects of the same language. Language assessment for such students must take into consideration language preference, proficiency, and dominance.

Language preference refers to the speaker's tendency to use one language more often than another when given a free choice. Assessment of language preference should include information about which language the child's parents prefer their child to use in school, and how they see the child's use of two languages in terms of particular times and places of use. Language preference can be influenced by several factors, such as socioeconomic status, domain of interaction, or acculturation pressures.

Language proficiency refers to the degree to which an individual demonstrates his/her competence in a language regardless of how that language may have been acquired. Skills to be assessed should include listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Language dominance is viewed in terms of the comparison of an individual's language skills in two or more languages. The dominant language is that in which the child demonstrates greater skill or through which s/he can most readily receive information or express her or himself. Language dominance is related but not necessarily synonymous with language preference for a given child. Language dominance data may reveal which language the child uses most frequently but not the language which s/he values most.

An early attempt to address the need for the development and dissemination of tests procedures for the language assessment if limited English speaking (LES) children was the evaluation of available language dominance and proficiency tests for bilingual students conducted by Silverman, Noa, and Russell (1976). Each test was evaluated according to four criteria: measurement validity, technical excellence, examinee appropriateness, and administrative usability. A handbook was produced in order to assist school administrators and teachers, as well as directors and coordinators of bilingual education program, in their program planning efforts. In addition to the general material on the theory of language testing in two or more languages, the handbook contains descriptions and evaluations of available language instruments.

Unfortunately, of a total of 24 tests described and evaluated, only one dealt with Asian languages: the MAT-SEA-CAL Oral Proficiency Tests which tested in English, Spanish, Cantonese, Tagalog, Ilokano, and Mandarin.

It was found that all 24 tests reviewed were strong in examinee appropriateness, i.e., test developers have been successful in their

attempts to meet the need for developing instruments appropriate for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

However, the study also revealed that the MAT-SEA-CAL tests, like the other instruments described and evaluated, were applicable only to primary school children, specifically K-4. Furthermore, measurement validity and technical excellence were identified as the neglected areas in the test development efforts. The tests described and evaluated dealt primarily with classifying students into language dominance categories and identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses in specific oral language content. At the time the study was conducted no evidence was found supporting the validity and reliability of the tests under review. This made it difficult to make classification or instructional decisions based on the test results with confidence.

It was pointed out by the investigators that in view of the fact that available oral language tests were limited both in the languages evaluated and age range covered, administrators were left with three alternatives in their efforts to evaluate oral language usage of different linguistic groups within their districts or regions:

1. Use existing tests based on a review of the agreement between the purposes of the tests being considered and the goals of district testing programs;

2. Adapt existing tests to meet the needs of particular districts; and

3. Develop new tests according to the characteristics of the language groups to be evaluated and the specifications established by the school administration.

Unfortunately, the first alternative is not possible in all cases and the other two alternatives are time-consuming, costly, and demand expertise which may not be readily available. Whichever alternative is taken, it is important that before classification and instructional decisions are made, other sources of student performance data be

investigated, such as classroom performance, teacher judgment, qualified professional opinion, and other test scores.

In conclusion, the investigators of the study emphasized the need for quality language assessment instruments for both students and programs. According to them, test developers, with few expectations, were not aware of similar ongoing development work being conducted by other individuals. Thus, much duplication rather than extension of the testing field was taking place. They stressed that it is only through collaboration among test developers that the most effective instruments can be produced.

Another study concerned with the adequacy of available instruments for evaluating the performancne of LEP students and indicating areas of need was conducted under a National Institute of Education (NIE) contract to the American Institutes for Research (AIR) from October 1976 to August 1977. The results of the study were contained in a needs analysis report (Locks, Pletcher, & Reynolds, 1978) and a catalogue of assessment instruments (Pletcher et al., 1978) for students in K-6 whose first language is one of the following: Chinese, French, Italian, Navajo, Portuguese, Spanish, or Tagalog.

To be considered for inclusion in the report, the instruments had to be available to the public and for review on or before April 15, 1977, and designed for and used with K-6 students in the United States. Additionally, they had to meet these criteria: normed with students residing in America (if norms were provided); developed, adapted, or statistically debiased for use with students whose first language is Chinese, French, Italian, Navajo, Portuguese, Spanish, or Tagalog; designed to yield scores that can be interpreted outside the context of a specific curriculum or a commercial series; considered by the author or source to be complete technically and with regard to instrument content; and not designed to identify developmental or physiological problems.

No Chinese language proficiency instruments were located. Although the Marysville Test of Language Dominance was found to contain acceptable cultural information, it had no available technical information. Two English language proficiency tests were listed, but only one was marked as containing technical information and acceptable cultural information.

Technical information was not available for the Tagalog proficiency, English proficiency, and language dominance tests listed. All of them were found to contain acceptable cultural information.

In the same report, two priorities for the development and dissemination of bilingual assessment instruments were identified: improving communication between instrument developers and users, and refining language assessment instruments.

The first priority was based on the findings that neither funds nor facilities were available for disseminating individual and project developed instruments; educators often seemed ambivalent toward publishers' attempts to develop unbiased instruments; school districts frequently refused to categorize students according to ethnicity, thus making it difficult to field test assessment instruments for their students; the National Assessment and Dissemination Centers in Texas, California, and Massachusetts appeared to have been more passive than active in their role as clearinghouses for evaluation information; and educators, including those in bilingual education projects, had not yet been in contact with the dissemination centers and, therefore, were unaware of potentially useful instruments and unable to share their instruments for inclusion in the files.

As to the second priority, it was recommended that instrument development efforts should address the need for improved language assessment instruments, a need most frequently noted by bilingual educators and faced by school districts in complying with the federal mandate to assess the linguistic ability of students whose primary

language is other than English. Needs of smaller groups such as the Italian and Tagalog must also be addressed, especially if they form a small segment of the commerical market, and therefore have very little chance of obtaining refined assessment instruments from commercial publishing companies. It was also recommended that instrument development efforts should concentrate on the needs that are close to being met. For example, it was felt that it would be most cost-effective to refine promising instruments that are nearly ready for use, such as the Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) and the Basic Inventory of Natural Language (BINL).

In answer to the need for developing and disseminating assessment instruments and procedures useful in bilingual settings, the Center for Bilingual Education of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory and the National Dissemination and Assessment Center in Los Angeles published Assessment Instruments in Bilingual Education: A Descriptive Catalogue of 342 Oral and Written Tests (1978). While this catalogue lists more tests available in more Asian languages such as Japanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, etc., they are far from being adequate. If evaluated, the same weaknesses found in oral dominance and proficiency tests evaluated by Silverman et al. in 1976 would most likely be found.

After a preliminary analysis of 46 available language proficiency and dominance tests, including some for Asian-Americans, De Avila and Duncan (1978) concluded that the instruments measured different things and that no single test seemed capable of assessing all of the various aspects thought to be important. Unfortunately, the investigators did not examine how well the instruments measured what they claimed to measure.

In summary, the concerns in the language assessment in LEP children in general, and Asian-Americans in particular, are numerous. The main problem appears to be the lack of instruments specially designed for the Asian-American population. The tests in Asian languages comprise a very

small percentage of the total number of those which are available. Unfortunately, most of what is available has not been widely disseminated nor evaluated systematically and in depth.

It has been pointed out that most existing instruments of bilingual language assessment have been primarily, if not exclusively, concerned with the assessment of structures and vocabulary, almost always without regard to context. Only a few tests have been developed to elicit natural language response (Sridhar, 1980).

Linguistic diversity characteristics many of the Asian-American populations. In the construction and/or use of language assessment instruments for/with them, one has to decide which language or dialect should be considered as basic or standard.

The development of language assessment instruments for Asian-American students is still in its infancy stage, which results in non- or inadequate assessment of the language proficiency and/or dominance of Asian-American students. Consequently, and unfortunately, the access of Asian-American students to appropriate programs designed to meet their special educational needs is severely limited. It appears that although there is a rapid increase in the number of the Asian-American population, there is no corresponding increase in the efforts to meet their needs.

Recent Development and Controversies in Language Testing

The significance of language in education is generally accepted and recognized. Language assessment has received the attention of educators, psychologists, psychometricians, and other scholars.

A review of the literature reveals that language testing is an area where there are conflicting opinions and unresolved controversies and concerns. This might be attributed to the complex nature of language and to the lack of understanding of how language is acquired, transmitted, utilized, remembered, and forgotten.

Recent writings on language teaching have increasingly emphasized the distinction between linguistic and communicative competence (Paulston & Bruder, 1976; Schultz, 1976), a distinction that is important for its methodological implications both for teaching and testing. Linguistic competence has been operationally defined as "the ability to construct phonetically and grammatically correct utterances and to differentiate between correct and incorrect sentences," while communicative competence refers to "the ability to understand and get a message across in a real-life situation" (Schultz, 1976). Communicative competence not only implies knowledge of vocabulary, control of grammatical structures, and the ability to differentiate sounds, but it also includes understanding of the implicit and implicative levels of meaning, i.e., those meanings that arise out of the situational context and give some insights into the speaker as a person (Jakobovits, 1970).

A close look at testing in today's foreign and second language classes reveals that the focus is still on linguistic competence, specifically on the passive knowledge of the forms and structures of language which is measured by asking the students to carry out a variety of grammatical exercises. Research findings, as well as personal insights of many language teachers, have indicated that proficiency in language manipulation does not guarantee proficiency in real communication. Consequently, there is an increasing demand for tests of communicative competence.

It is unfortunate that in spite of the emphasis on communicative competence in language, most language tests have remained what they used to be in the sixties--tests of discrete items in language, based on the assumption that knowledge of discrete bits of items would assure communicative language ability. The discrete-point approach (Carroll, 1961) to language testing as advocated by Lado in 1961 requires different subtests for each subskill (listening, speaking, reading, writing), aspect of skills (recognition vs. production, auditory vs. visual processing) and component of such skills (phonology, morphology, syntax,

and lexicon). Each subtest must consist of separate items which sample distinctive elements (phonemes, morphemes, etc.) within that particular skill, aspect, and component. This type of testing resulted in the production of well-designed standardized tests that could be used efficiently with large numbers of subjects over a wide geographical area, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Modern Language Association Foreign Language Tests for Teachers and Advanced Students.

Recently, there has been increasingly strong criticism of the principles of discrete item tests. Such criticisms are associated with the trends in contemporary linguistics. The language competence trend, connected with the views of psycholinguists, is based on a belief in overall language proficiency and a feeling that such knowledge is more than just a sum of a set of discrete parts. It emphasizes the creative character of language, the infinite nature of the set of possible sentences, and the incompleteness of grammars attempting to characterize knowledge of a language (Spolsky, 1978). Arguing that discrete structure tests fail to meet a number of basic criteria for the measurement of knowledge of language, Carroll (1961) stressed the need for an "integrative approach" which requires "attention not to specific structural or lexical items but to the total communicative effect of an utterance." The cloze and dictation tests are two of the procedures proposed to measure global proficiency or integrative skills. It is agreed that these techniques have the reliability, efficiency, and ease of administration of other objective measures, and the stronger validity provided by the theory behind them.

The other trend, the communicative competence trend, is associated with the views of modern sociolinguistics and accepts the belief in integrative testing, but insists on the need to add a strong functional dimension to language testing. Its key argument is that knowing a language involves being able to use it in certain circumstances and handle its varieties in different situations (Spolsky, 1978).

A substantial amount of literature on the nature of language proficiency is available in the field. In a volume on language testing research, Oller and Perkins (1980) included several studies on the number and types of components which are present in the language proficiency of first and second language learners. The editors of this volume noted that the evidence from many of the studies sustains the conclusion that a single global factor may underlie all (almost all) of the more than 60 processing tasks investigated. Oller and Perkins also stressed that all the research recorded in the volumn points to the fact that language skills of both native and non-native speakers are fundamentally related. Furthermore, they claim that all human beings seem to naturally attend to meaning in comprehending and producing discourse, and they are either unable or not good at attending to much of anything else.

Although language is learned in a social setting, social and cultural factors have for the most part been neglected both in research and in the construction and administration of tests. The importance of these factors in language acquisition (Wong-Fillmore, 1976), and the need to investigate psychological and sociolinguistic factors in the performance of language tasks (Oller & Perkins, 1980; Troike, 1981) have been pointed out.

Future Directions for Research and Development

Language assessment in general necessitates research in several areas. Spolsky (1975) identifies three specific areas where research will be important.

The first is the psycholinguistic area where research is needed for an understanding of what it really means to know a language. This is important in determining what to test and how best to test it. The distinction between discrete point and integrative tests has to be examined more closely so that their uses can be better understood. An efficient combination of the two might also be explored.

If knowing a language is different from knowing other things, as linguists claim it to be, this difference should be reflected in the methods used to assess them. Research in the psychometric and statistical area might be conducted in order to explore how special problems that arise in the attempt to measure linguistic knowledge might be dealt with statistically.

In the sociolinguistic aspect, research exploring the various dimensions of communicative competence (Wiemann & Backlund, 1980) and trying to find out how to go about sampling the different situations the child deals with is important. A theoretical framework for communicative competence (Canale, 1981) has to be developed and its applications in language pedagogy and assessment have to be investigated. Useful constructs such as "domain" might be explored further in order to handle problems related to role and style and real-life situations. The distinction between linguistic and communicative competence may be more complex than usually regarded and, therefore, deserves close examination.

The language assessment of LEP children, among whom are the Asian-Americans, is a challenging task. Among the problems have been the specification of the language skills and linguistic structures to be measured, and the identification of adequate assessment instruments. A description of the linguistic rules and structures and the sociological functions of a child's language is needed in order to resolve the first problem. Only after the communicative skills, linguistic structures, and functional use of child's language in all social domains have been determined and defined, can the means to accurately assess language be identified (Silverman et al., 1976).

Steps have already been taken to catalogue available assessment instruments for the LEP population. The effort needs to be expanded so as to include individual and project developed tests, and subject all instruments to a more systematic and comprehensive evaluation. Such evaluation should utilize more specific and sound criteria, aside from

availability of technical information and acceptability of cultural information. Suggestions for refining the evaluated instruments should be useful outcomes of the process.

In the absence of pragmatically-oriented tests, Sridhar (1980) recommends observation and recording of children's conversation with their peers during the unstructured activities in the playground, in the classroom, and even at parties. The presence of an adult usually makes some children self-conscious, shy, or embarrassed and, therefore, the speech data collected during most testing situations are not accurate samples of children's comprehension and speech abilities. In view of this, Sridhar suggests the use of one of the available instruments in the field and then a comparison of the results with the child's performance outside the classroom. A combination of the two scores, according to her, will provide a more realistic score.

The use of multiple criteria, though time-consuming, is gaining wider acceptance in the field of assessment. While various testing techniques for assessing language proficiency and language dominance are being tried out, other sources of information about the student, such as naturalistic observation, language usage and preference interviews, teacher judgment, writing samples, and many others, are being utilized. Since evidence suggests that there is no one best way to assess the language development of a child (Silverman et al., 1976), the use of several procedures appears logical and promising and, therefore, worth pursuing.

In languages where there are no available tests, appropriate instruments should be constructed immediately. Test developers should make use of the findings of research in language assessment, and explore promising approaches for testing language development and eliciting natural language.

Cultural variables are important considerations in language assessment, particularly of linguistically and culturally diverse children. In some cultures, for example, children are taught to interact with adults in certain ways, or even not to interact at all. This and other cultural/social rules often interfere with the assessment process (Pasanella et al., 1978) and must be studied for their implications for language teaching and assessment. It would be interesting and useful to study how Asian-American children respond to language tests. Comparative studies in this area might provide information on how to make the tests less intimidating so that they are more reliable measures of language dominance and/or proficiency.

With a renewed awareness of the importance of knowing a second or third language, more efficient language testing instruments and techniques are needed. It is time for the theorists and researchers to turn attention to the explanation of how people produce and comprehend meanings in the ordinary context of human experience.

The suggestions for research and development in the language assessment of Asian-Americans offered here are by no means exhaustive. Language is a complex behavior and assessing it is a complicated process. Every aspect of language and the process of evaluating competence in it can be an object of research. The linguistic and cultural diversity of the Asian-American population adds an interesting dimension that offers rich opportunities for research and development in the areas of language assessment.

Summary

If the educational needs of the Asian-American students are to be served adequately, an assessment of their proficiency in both English and their primary language is a must. Language assessment in general is a complex task, and even more so when dealing with Asian-Americans, primarily because of their linguistic and cultural diversity. At present

there is a serious lack of suitable language assessment instruments, particularly in the Asian and other minority languages in the United States. Concern over the inadequacy of language assessment instruments has been expressed in almost every major study or conference on bilingual education.

Assessment in Asian languages is still in its embryonic stage and the problems in this area are many. The areas for research and development in language testing in general, and Asian language assessment in particular, have been pointed out in this paper. It is hoped that through the collaborative efforts of theoreticians and practitioners, if not all, of the questions raised will be answered and the issues resolved. Hopefully, better designed language assessment tools and procedures, which are appropriate to different linguistic and cultural groups, will be developed, disseminated, and utilized, all for the benefit of the target population whose language skills are being assessed.

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Glossary

communicative competence - the ability to understand and get a message across in a real-life situation

cloze test - a test procedure which elicits the completion of blanks deleted from a text; the word "cloze" was coined in reference to the notion of psychological "closure"

domain - the social situation within which a certain language or variety of a language is used

discrete-point testing - testing of one point at a time, i.e., only one element (e.g., the third person singular "examines") from one component of language (e.g., syntax) is assessed in one skill (e.g., reading, a receptive skill)

integrative testing - testing two or more points together, usually implying the testing of a number of such points at once.

language - a system of arbitrary oral or written symbols used by a group of people to communicate

language dominance - an individual's degree of bilingualism, i.e., the relative proficiency of an individual with respect to more than one language

language preference - the speaker's tendency to use one language more often than another when given a free choice

language proficiency - the degree to which an individual exhibits control/mastery of the various aspects of a language, regardless of how that language may have been acquired

linguistic competence - the ability to construct phonetically and grammatically correct utterances and to differentiate between correct and incorrect sentences

native language - the language the student acquired first, usually during the first four or five years of his life (also known as home language, first language, and primary language)